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ABSTRACT

In the process of perfecting oral performances of selected scenes from Eudora Welty's "The Optimist's Daughter," it is important to study point of view and character as they pertain to the play. Four aspects should be considered to understand the point of view: (1) the character's story, (2) the position from which the narrator speaks, (3) the channels used to convey information, and (4) the distance at which the narrator places the reader. In "The Optimist's Daughter," the narrator is omniscient concerning the character of Laurel, and her position is that of an onlooker. Because the narrator explores Laurel's thoughts and feelings, the reader is near Laurel, the story, and the narrator. Among the criteria to be considered in character analysis are physical, social, and dispositional characteristics. Readers analyzing the characters of Laurel and Fay, her stepmother, discover many differences in their characters, including being opposite in physical appearance, social background, and personality. Because Eudora Welty has vividly portrayed the characters in the play and has clearly presented the story from Laurel's point of view, an examination of character and point of view can give performers a foundation on which to build a satisfying presentation of "The Optimist's Daughter." (DF)

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A STUDY OF POINT OF VIEW AND CHARACTER IN PREPARATION
FOR ORAL PERFORMANCE OF CUTTINGS FROM
THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

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CS 505298

A Study of Point of View and Character in Preparation
for Oral Performance of Cuttings from
The Optimist's Daughter

This paper presents a study of point of view and character as guides for the oral performance of scenes from The Optimist's Daughter.

Joanna Maclay says, "Any student of narrative literature must begin his study of a particular work with the question of point of view, since point of view conditions the entire structure of any narrative."¹ Eudora Welty used "The Eye of the Story" for a subtitle of an essay on Katherine Anne Porter. She used the same phrase for the title of a book of selected essays and reviews.² "The Eye of the Story" is obviously an appropriate beginning for an essay on point of view in The Optimist's Daughter, which Reynolds Price terms, "Eudora Welty's strongest, richest work."³ The story is seen through the eyes of Laurel McKelva Hand. The narrator begins by saying, "A nurse held the door open for them. Judge McKelva going first, then his daughter Laurel, then his wife Fay, they walked into the windowless room where the doctor would make his examination."⁴ Although we see a narrative frame suggested by the frame of the open door being held by the nurse, we soon know that the narrator's eyes are really Laurel's eyes. By the end of the second paragraph, we read of Laurel, "Her dark blue eyes looked sleepless." We read and see the entire story through

Laurel's eyes. Her mother, Becky, died after suffering problems with her eyes, her father is being examined by an eye specialist in New Orleans, and the entire story is a study in Laurel's gradual acceptance of the conflicts of life with a clear vision.

Because we see the story through Laurel's eyes, we know long before the final confrontation in the McKelva kitchen that Laurel really dislikes Fay. The third person narrator omniscient to Laurel shows us a page at a time just how unpleasant Fay is. It is difficult for us to understand why an intelligent, cultured man like Judge McKelva would have been attracted to a selfish, rude, uncultured woman like Fay. With Laurel we wonder. Not only what Fay says, but also the narrator's choice of words for what she does ("She sidled closer to the bed."⁵) and how she talks ("It wasn't any use in you bothering to come so far."⁶) tells us that point of view significantly colors character.

Norman Friedman advises us to ask four questions as we seek to understand point of view: (1) Who tells the story? (2) From what position does the narrator speak? (3) What channels of information (author's words, thoughts, perceptions, feelings; character's words and actions, thoughts, perceptions, feelings; information on mental states, setting, situation, character)? and (4) At what distance does narrator place reader (near, far, shifting)?⁷

We have already considered the first question. The narrator is omniscient to one character, Laurel. Although

we read of Laurel in third person, we get the sense of knowing her more fully than we know many first person narrators. For example, Miss Welty's first person Edna Earle in The Ponder Heart tells not her own story but Uncle Daniel's story; Sister in "Why I Live at the P. O." tells her own story, but readers soon understand that Sister presents a distorted view. The Optimist's Daughter is clearly Laurel's story. Reynolds Price says, "The story is told in third person, but it is essentially seen and told by Laurel herself. At the end, we have not watched a scene or heard a word more than Laurel; there is not even a comment on Laurel which she, in her native modesty, could not have made aloud."⁸

Friedman's question on position of narrator is also addressed by Reynolds Price. He says, "The richness and new unity of the story--its quality of summary--is the natural image produced by this action as it passes before Miss Welty's (literal) vision--look at a room from the perfect point, you can see it all. She has found the point, the place to stand to see this story--and we discover at the end that she's seen far more than that." Price describes her "stance and line of sight" as "that of the onlooker."⁹ He adds, "Mystery dissolves before patient watching--the unbroken stare of Laurel McKelva Hand, the woman at its center."¹⁰

Friedman's question on channels of information is best answered by careful readers. The narrator gives us Laurel's

thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. We hear each character's words through Laurel's ears and see the action through Laurel's eyes. Perhaps Laurel's married name Hand gives us a clue that we are to experience much of the story through a sensitive touch--Dr. Courtland's hands had "fingers that had always looked, to Laurel, as if their mere touch on the crystal of a watch would convey to their skin exactly what time it was."¹¹ Attention to touch and to Laurel's deeper feelings is important from this early scene in the doctor's office all through the story and is highlighted in the final scene that shows Laurel's sensitivity and Fay's inability to feel in the conflict relating to the breadboard. Fay's use of incorrect language, inappropriate remarks, and the dishonest statement about her family help the narrator depict Fay from Laurel's point of view.

Yet we see Mrs. Dalzell showing sympathy for Fay as she says, "You pore little women."¹² Major Bullock, watching the Chisoms leave with Fay in their pick-up truck, says, "Poor little woman. Got a bigger load than she knows yet how to carry by herself."¹³ Surely Fay herself, Mrs. Dalzell, Major Bullock, Judge McKelva, and the Chisoms would have selected different things to tell about Fay, but we get the impression from what we learn throughout the story that Laurel is a reliable narrator. We see what Fay does, hear what she says, discover what concerns her most, and we dislike her right away.

We can answer Friedman's question on distance by saying that the reader is near the story, near Laurel, near the narrator. The reader sees inside the doctor's office, the Hibiscus, the Judge's room at the hospital, the waiting room where the Dalzells have a family picnic, the elevator at the hospital, the car that Dr. Courtland provides for Fay and Laurel, and all the other places where the story moves. We feel close enough to see the friends and the undertaker at the train station, we can hear the striking clock in the McKelva parlor, ("Oh, how I hate that old striking clock!" cried Fay. "It's the first thing I'm going to get rid of."¹⁴), and we stand with the townspeople and the "family" in the "new part" of Mount Salus Cemetery. As we feel close to Laurel, we sense a closeness between Laurel and the implied author. Reynolds Price tells us, "Miss Welty's own mother was from West Virginia."¹⁵ We sense a closeness between the narrator--Laurel and the people of Mount Salus. We believe that Laurel and Becky were close. As Becky sat at the sewing machine, Laurel would make patterns of the fallen scraps of cloth. In their short marriage, Phil and Laurel had a spiritual closeness. Becky and Clinton McKelva seemed to the child Laurel to be a close couple, especially as they read aloud to one another. The examples of closeness are many, but the significant distance is the moral distance between Fay and all that Laurel treasures. Laurel's burning of her mother's keepsakes, then taking a bath, and deciding not to take the breadboard are ways of

dealing with this moral distance. The preceding examples of types of distance were suggested by Wayne Booth's "variations of Distance."¹⁶

Woven into an author's choice of point of view is the way characters will be portrayed. Since this is Laurel's story, we expect to come to know Laurel, to suffer with Laurel, and ultimately to learn from Laurel. We see Fay as an antagonist and Laurel as a protagonist. (Although even the characters with small parts in the story are drawn clearly, this essay will not be long enough to discuss the good neighbors in Mount Salus, Dr. Courtland, the child Wendell, Grandpa Chisom, or even Laurel's parents--her father the "optimist" and her mother who "predicted" Fay.) The contrasting characters of Laurel and Fay will be examined.

Lucinda MacKethan says, "For the purpose of discussing the 'act of focusing' . . . we can divide her [Eudora Welty's] characters into four major groups based on their ability to 'stand still' and see themselves in proper relation to their worlds. We might label the types as the Objects, the Insiders, the Outsiders, and the Seers or Onlookers."¹⁷ She sees Fay as "Outsider," and reports, "Fay, as Judge McKelva's second wife . . . has the whole community against her." Fay presents "a direct threat to the ritualized patterns of life that have been nurtured, protected, and preserved at great cost by the old, closed families of . . . Mount Salus."¹⁸ MacKethan sees Laurel as

"Seer--the one who counts the most in the act of focusing . . . [In] the story of Laurel McKelva, there are no events, hardly any images, that are not filtered through her watchful, waiting eyes."¹⁹ (The Judge is in MacKethan's "Object" group to be "watched, counted on, worried over." His first wife Becky is an "Insider" who "lives only as a sharp yet distanced memory."²⁰) This grouping reminds us again of how tightly character and point of view are interwoven.

The authors of Group Performance of Literature suggest seven levels of characterization advocated by Sam Smiley and/or Oscar Brockett:

1. Biological (human or animal, race, male or female)
2. Physical (physical size, age, voice, health, posture)
3. Social (class, nationality, education, religion)
4. Dispositional (personality, temperament, mood)
5. Motivational (desires, goals, purposes)
6. Deliberative (quantity and quality of character in thought)
7. Decisive (decision-making)²¹

As we compare and contrast Fay and Laurel we see both of them as human, white women. We see Fay as Laurel sees her:

Perhaps she was forty, and so younger than Laurel. There was little even of forty in her looks except the line of her neck and the backs of her little square, idle hands. She was bony and blue-veined; as a child she had very possibly gone undernourished. Her hair was still a childish tow . . . She had round, country-blue eyes and a little feist jaw.²²

In contrast, we see Laurel as "a slender, quiet faced woman in her middle forties, her hair still dark."²³ Their voices are different. The dialogue tags such as "said Fay in a cross voice"²⁴ and "intense, tight little voice . . . in high pitch"²⁵ indicate Fay's characteristic voice. Her parting words to Dr. Courtland are "screamed."²⁶ Laurel's voice is gentle. We don't have to be told, but we know from the way she "touched her hand to the window glass"²⁷ to show Dr. Courtland that she understands that her father's death was not his fault.

Socially Laurel and Fay are opposites. Laurel is well educated, is the Judge's daughter in Mount Salus, and was brought up a Presbyterian. Fay is not interested in education, comes from a poorly educated family in Texas, and was apparently brought up a Baptist. Fay tells Dr. Courtland, "All I hope is you lay awake tonight and remember how little you were good for."²⁸ She chides Laurel for wanting to make bread by Becky's recipe, "It all tastes alike, don't it?"²⁹ These two examples of incorrect verbs serve to show Fay's lack of education. It is obvious that the Chisoms and McKelvas are far apart socially. Fay's performance the day of the funeral is repulsive to Laurel.

Laurel had wanted the casket closed, but Fay, dressed in black satin, strides in and creates a scene by kissing the corpse. Margaret Bolsterli says Laurel and Fay "cannot communicate because the gulf between their backgrounds and expectations is so deep."³⁰ She adds, Fay "was trained in the tradition expounded by the bumper sticker on her brother's pick-up truck, 'Do Unto Others Before They Do Unto You.'"³¹

On the dispositional level Fay is self-centered, insensitive, coarse, cruel, dishonest, "a woman without the capacity to feel, with no sense of respect for the past or the dead, a frightening harbinger of the future."³² Laurel is sensitive, considerate, compassionate, and generous. She was brought up to care for other people.

At the motivational level Fay wants everything she can get in the way of material possessions and a good time. Her green shoes and drop earrings, her attitude about being in New Orleans and not going to the Carnival, and her selfish claim of ownership of everything in the McKelva house all suggest what motivates Fay. Laurel is motivated by love and a search for meaning, but she has conflicts to resolve.

The deliberative and decisive levels are difficult to distinguish. Fay has little time to be deliberate about deciding to go back to Texas for a visit with her family. Having her transportation provided one way and being allowed to be with her family--the same family she refused to admit to Laurel when they were at the Hibiscus--she decides to take her unpacked bag and go. She shows more deliberative

behavior when she decides to have the Judge buried in the "new part" of Mount Salus Cemetery. When, at the cemetery, Laurel mentions the big camellia in bloom, Fay responds, "How could the biggest fool think I was going to bury my husband with his old wife? He's going in the new part."³³

Laurel's behavior is deliberative in many instances. She spends most of the night before she goes back to Chicago sorting through her mother's belongings. The next day she burns

her father's letters to her mother, and Grandma's letters, and the saved little books and papers . . . Milton's Universe. . . .³⁴

There was nothing she was leaving . . . to show for her mother's life and her mother's happiness and suffering, and nothing to show for Fay's harm; her father's turning between them, holding onto them both, then letting them go, was without any sign.³⁵

Laurel's decisive behavior at one point is explained by Margaret Bolsterli. She says when Laurel

fully realizes that Fay was the direct cause of Judge McKelva's death, her impulse is to reach out to her dead mother and tell her so. One of Laurel's epiphanies comes when she understands that if she could tell her mother this terrible thing, it would be an act comparable in brutality to Fay's abuse of her father on his death bed.³⁶

These examples are only suggestions of contrasts between Fay and Laurel. They serve an interpreter by giving some starting points for working toward performance.

Because Eudora Welty has portrayed her characters so vividly and has clearly presented the story from Laurel's

point of view, an examination of character and point of view
can give any oral performer a foundation on which to build a
satisfying program on The Optimist's Daughter.

Notes

¹ Joanna Hawkins Maclay, "The Interpreter and Modern Fiction: Problems of Point of View and Structural Tensiveness," in Studies in Interpretation, ed. Esther M. Doyle and Virginia Hastings Floyd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1972), p. 168.

² Eudora Welty, The Eye of the Story (New York: Random House, 1977).

³ Reynolds Price, "The Onlooker, Smiling: An Early Reading of The Optimist's Daughter," Shenandoah, 20 (Spring 1969), p. 59.

⁴ Eudora Welty. The Optimist's Daughter (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 3.

⁵ Welty, O. D., p. 25.

⁶ Welty, O. D., p. 27.

⁷ Norman Friedman. "Point of View: The Development of a Critical Concept," PMLA, 70 (December 1955), pp. 1160-84.

⁸ Price, p. 62.

⁹ Price, pp. 59-60.

¹⁰ Price, p. 62.

¹¹ Welty, Optimist's Daughter, p. 4.

- 12 Welty, O. D., p. 35.
- 13 Welty, O. D., p. 100.
- 14 Welty, O. D., p. 100.
- 15 Price, p. 68.
- 16 Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 155-65.
- 17 Lucinda MacKethan, "To See Things in Their Time: The Act of Focus in Eudora Welty's Fiction," American Literature, 50 (May 1978), pp. 259-60.
- 18 MacKethan, p. 261.
- 19 MacKethan, pp. 261-62.
- 20 MacKethan, p. 264.
- 21 Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, and Phillis Rienstra Jeffrey, Group Performance of Literature (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1977), pp. 47-48.
- 22 Welty, O. D., p. 26.
- 23 Welty, O. D., p. 3.
- 24 Welty, O. D., p. 16.
- 25 Welty, O. D., p. 32.
- 26 Welty, O. D., p. 43.

27 Welty, O. D., p. 42.

28 Welty, O. D., p. 42.

29 Welty, O. D., p. 117.

30 Margaret Jones Bolsterli, "Woman's Vision: The Worlds of Women in Delta Wedding, Losing Battles, and The Optimist's Daughter," in Eudora Welty--Critical Essays, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1979), p. 152.

31 Bolsterli, p. 152.

32 Ruth M. Vande Kieft, "Looking With Eudora Welty," in Eudora Welty--Critical Essays, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1979), p. 442.

33 Welty, O. D., p. 90.

34 Welty, O. D., p. 169.

35 Welty, O. D., p. 170.

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